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STATE FOR WHA/BSC - MARY DASCHBACH

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SUBJECT: URUGUAY CONSIDERS EXTENDING VOTE TO DIASPORA

SUMMARY

1. The incumbent Frente Amplio (FA) coalition appears set to put a proposal of suffrage for Uruguayan expatriates to a public referendum. As the votes of thousands of returning expatriates played a key role in the FA's 2004 victory, the move is generally perceived to have been posited in order to favor FA electoral chances in the future. END SUMMARY.

Uruguayan Public to Decide

2. After several years in committee and consultancy, a proposal to extend the vote to Uruguay's 600,000-strong diaspora (a 2004 electoral promise), will be presented to congress in the second half of March. As the FA holds 53 percent of seats in congress, it should have no trouble getting the absolute majority needed to begin the process, which will include a plebiscite since the move involves amending the constitution. Constitutional amendments require an absolute majority in congress, an absolute majority in the subsequently created constitutional convention, and an absolute majority in the public. However, the constitutional convention can be bypassed with a 2/3 majority from congress, which would take the vote to the public as soon as the October presidential elections. That does not appear a likely scenario at the moment.

3. The vast majority of Uruguayans abroad live in Argentina, Spain and the U.S. In the 2004 presidential election some 40,000 of those expatriates returned home to vote. Many individuals crossed the river from Argentina courtesy of greatly reduced fees provided by the private "Buquebus" ferry service, and as a consequence it is a widely held view here that this so-called "voto Buquebus" (Buquebus vote) was instrumental in securing the presidency for the FA. Note: Although this has been viewed as a political move by the owner of Buquebus -- even with reduced fares -- Buquebus still profited from the maneuver as October normally represents a fallow month for ferry crossings. End note.

The Pros and Cons of Voting From Abroad

4. In the debate surrounding the issue, those in support typically draw attention to the fact that globally, 115 countries recognize expatriate suffrage, while in Latin America the only exceptions (apart from Uruguay) are Paraguay and Mexico. Supporters of the measure typically present the consular vote as a human right, while those against argue that non-residents have no right to decide the politics of a society in which they do not directly participate and to which they do not directly contribute. Some commentators, noting that a full 3/4 of those returning to vote in 2004 did so from Argentina, have raised the specter of Uruguayans resident in Argentina falling under the influence of Argentine politicians seeking to advance their own agendas in Uruguay.

5. Details of the proposal are still vague. What is clear is that if approved, the proposal would first come into effect for the

presidential elections of 2014. Despite the issue being widely referred to as "the consular vote," it is not yet clear whether the votes would be registered in Uruguayan consulates or sent via mail or the Internet. Nor is it known whether individuals normally resident in Uruguay, but absent on the day of voting, would similarly be able to record their votes abroad. There is, nevertheless, some suggestion that the proposal aims to secure the right for expatriates to vote not just in national elections but also in local elections and referenda.

Comment

¶6. Although this measure will not affect the upcoming elections, the Uruguayan diaspora is equivalent to over 20 percent of the voting population and would, in the future, have a significant effect on elections. Most observers appear to have concluded that allowing votes from abroad would likely expand the FA's base. Whether those potential voters will maintain their supposed preference until 2014, however, is pure speculation. End comment.

MATTHEWMAN